

Top Seven Guest Trends for 2009 Lisa Terry, Contributing Editor 02/11/09

It's no secret that 2009 is expected to be a challenging year for the hospitality industry. But consumers won't stop traveling or stop eating out entirely. Winning their business means understanding and then meeting, or even better, exceeding, their expectations. Technology has an important role to play in that mission. Here are seven trends that will affect guest behavior in 2009.

1. Personalization. Technology has trained consumers to expect businesses to track their preferences and serve them accordingly. As such, they bring those expectations even to face-to-face experiences. The 5-Star/5-Diamond Stein Eriksen Lodge (www.steinlodge.com) in Park City, Utah, enhanced its ability to deliver stellar service by integrating the Northwind-Maestro (www.maestropms.com) front office property management system (PMS) together with the sales and catering operation, the spa management system, and an analytics data mining system that enables any authorized staff member to see all aspects of a guest's stay. "If something happened during Mr. Smith's check-in, we note that in a field so all of the people in the hotel know that's his 'hot button' to make sure it will not happen again," says Jan Raio, the hotel's director of sales and marketing. "It's a huge change to get staff to put everything in the computer," she says, an effort the hotel encourages by offering incentives.



At The Breakers, (www.thebreakers.com), Palm Beach, Fla., staff members rely on Agilysys (www.agilysys.com) lodging management system (LMS) to help track and communicate about guest preferences as the property expands its customer relationship management capabilities. Soon, TVs will display personalized messages and itineraries. "Integration of any application with LMS or any Agilysys product is key," says Barbara Gerth, director of internal audit. "All data flows through there."

Similar goals are at work at Dominos Pizza (www.dominos.com). Microsoft TellMe (www.tellme.com) automated ordering uses incoming calls to look up the last order and offer to repeat it, offering a fast, convenient, and consistent ordering experience.

2. Social Networking: Offline. Consumers want to feel connected, virtually and in the real world. Hotels and restaurants are responding by pumping up their presence in both. By April, 2009, all 400 Sheratons worldwide will feature Link@Sheraton (www.starwoodhotels.com), a digitally connected, social gathering spot in hotel lobbies where guests can hang out, use workstations, access WiFi or send video postcards using Microsoft (www.microsoft.com) equipment. Tests showed guests would line up to use the complimentary technology, whose cost is covered in part by sales in adjoining cafes. "We found customers who use Link@ have a better guest experience, score us higher in value for price paid, and are more likely to return to the hotel and the brand," says Hoyt H. Harper, II, senior vice president, brand management, The Sheraton Group. Link@Sheraton will soon test Microsoft Surface technology.

3. Social Networking: Online. A Web site is not enough; hospitality operators must be active in Internet life. Forrester Research (www.forrester.com) found that 40 percent of online travelers use content from other consumers in their travel decisions; increasingly user-generated video will be a feature. Creating processes and policies to monitor and respond to online reviews is essential.

"Branding has traditionally been on the marketer's list of things to do," says Diane Clarkson, travel analyst for Forrester. "The marketer no longer controls that."

Leveraging the Web was the 2008 mission of Lisa Gorey, director of sales and e-commerce for Don Shula's Resort and Golf Club, Miami, (www.donshulahotel.com). The independent resort uses TravelClick's (www.travelclick.net) Hospitality Toolkit to make its revamped Web site search engine-friendly, and monitors guest reviews via Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts) and TravelClick Real Reviews. Early on, Gorey says she "responded to a review that was not very good, and we quickly started to see people post more things, and most were good comments." Both positive and negative reviews are available on the Web site. "We decided as a company to take the good and the bad," enhancing the resort's credibility with guests.

Less clear is the right way to do social networking sites; those perceived as mere commercials don't get a lot of traffic, but consumers will expect a presence. Don Shula's is testing a Facebook (www.facebook.com) site allowing its Signature members to network with each other.

Reporting helps see Web-based trends; the resort hopes to eventually integrate these with its Northwind PMS and its customer relationship management application.

4. Self-service/Portability. Enabling self-service and mobile applications helps hospitality companies enhance customer satisfaction. At Hollywood Casino's newest property, Penn National Race Course (www.hcpn.com) in Grantville, Penn., servers take orders on the slot floor via MICROS mobile units, prompting faster delivery via drink runners. Two new self-service beverage stations allow guests to serve themselves non-alcoholic beverages. "Customer service is of utmost importance to us, and as such we are always looking at creative and cost-effective ways of enhancing the guest experience," says Bill Haynes, vice president, information technology.

Mobility is also extending outside the property to guest devices. More hotels are looking at mobile applications for confirmations, maps to the hotel, and booking, says Forrester's Clarkson.

5. Environmentalism. Rapidly growing awareness of green issues makes it imperative that hospitality companies begin to understand, improve and communicate about their environmental impact. The Breakers continues its long-term commitment to green by switching to bamboo linens, less frequent laundering and a green market for employees, features it touts in hotel marketing. The Breakers is also going paperless through its Agilysys DataMagine system.

According to Jupiter Research, more than one-quarter of European online travel buyers said their purchase decisions are influenced by green company policies. However, only a small share (four percent) of European online travel buyers purchase green travel products such as carbon-neutral flights. In the U.S., environmentally-conscious adults are 20 percent more likely to research travel online than are their non-green counterparts.

6. Healthy Choices. Consumers' interest in health is behind the advent of emerging nutrition labeling laws. Several hospital and institutional food service operations, as well as Silvergreens, (www.silvergreens) a two-unit California healthy casual dining chain, have added nutrition facts to receipts from Nutricate (www.nutricate.com). The company is lobbying to get receipt labels qualified as a compliance method, arguing that it's more effective to educate customers on healthy choices over time. In the meantime, they complement menu board listings. At Silvergreens, which shares an owner with Nutricate, sales jumped 18.5 percent after deploying nutrition information, health strategies, fun facts and coupons on receipts.

Now Nutricate messages are available via two-sided receipts from NCR (www.ncr.com).

7. Cutting Back. Tough economic times are challenging consumers and hospitality organizations alike. With global markets in flux, hospitality companies can't even count on European patrons. At the Stein Eriksen, customers "are still coming back, but they're giving up a day or not going out to dinner," says Raio. Hospitality companies are responding to economic woes by pumping up the value, such as package deals and more liberal blackout policies, and using technology to enhance service while trimming costs.

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